

2018

# Learning Beyond the Binary: Gender Non-Conforming Students at Humboldt State University

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## Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) college enrollment is on the rise, including a growing number of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) students who are choosing to be 'out' on campuses across the United States (Beemyn 2005). Before 2017, the California State University (CSU) system, and therefore Humboldt State University (HSU), did not gather information on sexuality or gender identity, so it has been challenging to know how many LGBT and TGNC students we have on campus, and how to best meet their needs. In 2017 we were able to attain some information on the small but growing TGNC student population at HSU. To date, few college and universities provide resources specific to this growing student population, giving HSU an opportunity to be a leader. Emerging research on trans and TGNC students reports high rates of victimization and marginalization on college campuses. These stressors can lead to poor academic performance, dropping out, substance abuse, emotional distress, homelessness and suicidality (Beemyn and Rankin 2011; Grossman and D'Augelli 2006; Singh, Hays and Watson 2011). A growing body of research has introduced strategies to better serve these populations, outlining specific processes universities can take to assist LGBT students, with specific directives to support TGNC students. These strategies remove barriers for this underrepresented group, and help LGBT students to be successful in higher education.

***Transgender and gender non-conforming students report high rates of victimization and marginalization on college campuses, which can lead to poor academic performance, dropping out, substance abuse, emotional distress, homelessness and suicidality***

In order to understand the needs of this particular student population, for support and retention on our campus, we explored the needs of TGNC students at HSU, utilizing face-to-face interviews and a survey. We used the survey (n=200) to gain a general understanding of what students at HSU collectively know, feel, believe and understand about gender, GNC folks, and HSU. Since there is very little academic research on GNC individuals, we also provided a space for students to tell their own narratives with interviews (n=11). The goal of this study was to fill in the gaps of understanding the experiences of GNC students in higher education, starting with HSU. We do this by exploring the knowledge and perspectives of the broader HSU student population, and by sharing recommendations offered by GNC students, based on their lived experiences as students at HSU. Providing students with adequate resources can contribute to lowering victimization rates and increasing student success, including retention and graduation.

***The goal of this study is to understand the experiences of gender non-conforming students at Humboldt State University***

The report begins with a brief description of terminology, and a summary of the scholarly research on the issues regarding TGNC students. We then describe our methods and analyses. We conclude with recommendations for HSU, and for the organization of the future Queer Center for Academic Excellence.

## Terminology

**Transgender:** An expansive term that describes the experience of an individual whose gender identity differs with their sex assigned at birth, in addition to combating societal expectations of gender norms (Bilodeau 2005; Bilodeau and Renn 2005; Bornstein 1994). The term *transgender* continues to evolve and is often conceptualized as an umbrella term for a range of different identities including non-normative gender expressions, performances and identities. The usefulness of the “transgender umbrella” as a way of understanding the complexities of gender continues to be debated, as it lumps together much gender and sexual diversity.

**Gender non-conforming, non-binary or genderqueer:** Language preferred by many who identify outside of the gender assigned at birth. This language may be used by those who do not identify with the term *transgender* (Davidson 2007).

**Cisgender:** Individuals whose gender identity coincides with the sex they were assigned at birth (Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

**Heteronormative:** An ideological socio-cultural, legal and institutional system that upholds hegemonic presumptions of heterosexuality, and two genders (men and women). In this system, gender mirrors “biological sex,” and the only permissible sexual attraction is between “opposite” genders (men and women), deemed “acceptable” and “natural” (Kitzinger 2005).

**Gender-normative:** Language used to describe individuals, spaces, institutions, and policies that traditionally adhere to societal gender expectations. Correlated with *cisgender*, as individuals tend to reinforce ideals of masculinity and femininity.

**Gender-neutral pronouns:** The singular *they* has been adopted by individuals who do not identify with the dichotomous masculine/feminine pronouns he/her and she/him. Additionally, there are other proposed options, including ze, hir, sir, and ve. Examples:

	Nominative (subject)	Objective (object)	Possessive determiner	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive
Invented pronouns					
Ne	Ne laughed	I called <i>nem</i>	<i>Nir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>nirs</i>	Ne likes <i>nemself</i>
Ve	Ve laughed	I called <i>ver</i>	<i>Vis</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>vis</i>	Ve likes <i>verself</i>
Spivak	Ey laughed	I called <i>em</i>	<i>Eir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>eirs</i>	Ey likes <i>emself</i>
Ze (or zie) and hir	Ze laughed	I called <i>hir</i>	<i>Hir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>hirs</i>	Ze likes <i>hirself</i>
Ze (or zie) and zir	Ze laughed	I called <i>zir</i>	<i>Zir</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>zirs</i>	Ze likes <i>zirself</i>
Xe	Xe laughed	I called <i>xem</i>	<i>Xyr</i> eyes gleam	That is <i>xyrs</i>	Xe likes <i>xemself</i>

Source: <https://genderneutralpronoun.wordpress.com>

## Gender Non-Conformity in Higher Education

In the last decade there has been an increase in students coming out as transgender in institutions of higher learning (Rankin et al. 2010), which has also led to more research on gender non-conforming students, and changing policies to create trans-inclusive campuses.

Research has found transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals experience a range of discrimination and marginalization, from interpersonal to institutional, including their experiences on college campuses. Studies have documented that TGNC college students:

- Face being kicked out of restrooms and campus housing for identifying with their gender identity (Bilodeau 2007; Finger 2010; Seelman 2014)
- Encounter harassment, violent and sexual assault, and report experiencing feelings of exclusion (Grant et al. 2011)
- Experience invisibility due to the dismissal of their gender identity (Seelman et al. 2012)
- Have high rates of alcohol abuse (Tupler et al 2017) and attempted suicide (Seelman 2016)

These issues occur within college and university settings that are largely gender- and heteronormative, perpetually making an outsider of those who does not conform to societal norms and behaviors expected for their perceived gender. This may especially be complicated for students of color, as part of their intersecting identities and experiences (more below).

In a study of transgender students at two Midwestern universities, Bilodeau (2007) outlined four characteristics of the gender binary that structure the way institutions of higher learning further marginalize TGNC individuals:

- Assuming gender, and labeling individuals into male and female categories
- Accepting punishment as normal or helpful when gender norms are violated, while labeling those who refuse to conform as deviant
- Privileging binary systems, furthered ostracizing students through apparent and unclear processes and procedures
- Isolating TGNC individuals to feel invisible because of the confinement that the binary creates, and the underrepresentation of TGNC and non-binary individuals

In Bilodeau's (2007) study, these patterns were seen in all aspects of university life, across campus settings, from classrooms, administration, clubs and organizations, residence halls and bathrooms enacted by staff, faculty, administrators and students.

As a result of U.S. society being predominantly gender- and heteronormative, particular behaviors and values are taken to be the norm. What is perceived to be "normal" is heterosexual and cisgender. Subsequently, people who do not fit these expected gender norms risk being targeted for victimization or being ostracized or marginalized. Gender expectations, when reinforced, block TGNC individuals from access to resources, self-determination, acknowledgement and visibility. All of this hinders student success for TGNC students.

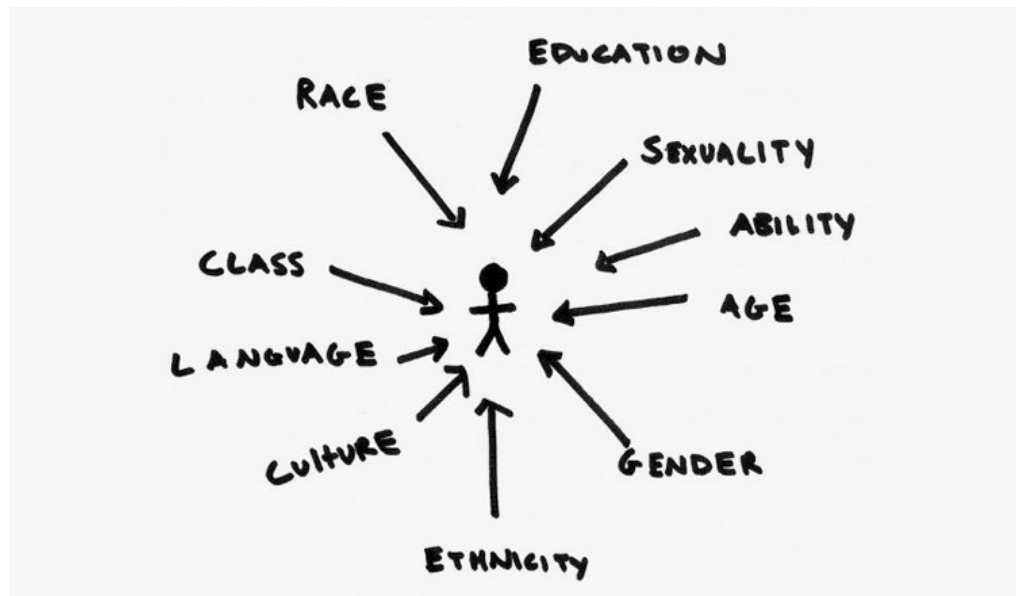
## *Gender Non-Conforming Students of Color*

In addition to stressors related to gender identity, gender non-conforming people of color also face tensions related to their ethnic and racial identity. The constant discrimination can also predispose many students to depression, stigma, feelings of exclusion and suicide.

Intersectionality is a useful framework for this particular research, as it emphasizes overlapping identities, specifically exploring the experiences of students as they come from an array of diverse backgrounds with multidimensional identities.

Students of color often have to struggle with having to choose their racial or gender/sexual identity as their dominant identity. This may especially be the case for TGNC students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) like Humboldt State University (Campus Pride 2018). Identities can fluctuate, depending on the space one is in, and navigating college campuses is one example of how students may feel forced to shift between identities. For instance, while social interest groups or student organizations can provide safe havens for people of the same race, sexuality or hobby they can also erase the multidimensional identity that one occupies. Students may, for example, feel forced to hide their sexual or gender identity for a race-based academic program, or face racism when they try to get involved in a queer student organization at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Intersectionality acknowledges students experience all of their identities at once. These identities are all important, but especially challenging for students of color, who may feel they have to leave their race at the door when entering queer spaces and vice versa.

### Intersectionality



Source: <http://writingtheother.com/intersectionality-and-characterization/>



## The Study

This study's purpose was to provide an exploratory study of the experiences of gender non-conforming students on the HSU campus. The focus was to understand the needs and challenges of this student population at Humboldt State University. To begin this exploration, I collected data as part of a course called Community Action Research and Grant Writing, in a research team with four other students during the Spring 2016 semester. We used two methods: a survey, and semi-structured interviews (IRB # 15-198). The interview questions were originally formulated to try to understand the general experiences of gender non-conforming students at HSU, in order to access the needs and better serve this student population. The survey served as a tool to gain insight into what students at HSU know, feel, believe and understand about gender, gender non-conforming folks, and services at HSU.

### *Sampling and Recruitment*

**Interviews:** We interviewed HSU campus who: (a) were 18 years of age or older, (b) were previously or currently enrolled at HSU, and (c) self-identified as gender non-conforming or non-binary. We posted flyers around campus to recruit participants and sent the flyer to various departments and organizations within HSU, based on the personal and professional connections of the research group.

**Survey:** For the survey, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) provided us with 900 randomly selected emails. Participants were invited to participate through an email, with a link to the survey created on Google Forms. Respondents were asked about their knowledge, perceptions and attitudes regarding gender, gender non-conforming folks, and services the university provides. The respondents' answers automatically populated a Google Spreadsheet, and respondent identities remained anonymous to the researchers.

### *Participants*

**Interviews:** We completed semi-structured interviews with 11 self-identified gender non-conforming or non-binary students at HSU. One student was an HSU alum, and the rest were current students, ranging in academic majors. Seven students self-identified as white, and four students identified as people of color. The median age was 24 for all participants; ages ranged from 19 to 33 years old.

**Survey:** The research team sent the email invitation to the survey was sent to 900 students, based on the list generated by OIE. A total of 200 participants (n=200) completed the online survey, for a participation rate of 22%. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60, majored in fields across all departments, and varied in their gender identity.

### *Analysis*

We analyzed the data gathered from the interviews using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software, and the data gathered from the survey using SPSS statistical software.

## The Results

The objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences of gender non-conforming students at HSU, and explore how much the general student population knows about gender non-conformity. What the respondents discussed during the interviews echoes the previous research conducted on transgender students, including: the need for faculty/staff trainings, student housing safe spaces, bathrooms, misgendering, and improvement for resources.

### Self-Identification

Participants in both the interviews and survey explained and labeled themselves in an array of different ways, seemingly all under the larger label of gender non-conforming or non-binary. During the interviews when asked, “How do you identify your gender?” students responded with a particular label reflecting their own self-image. Allowing participants to use their own language to describe themselves maintains self-determination, which was important to the student respondents.

One out of the eleven interview participants identified as trans, specifically as a non-binary trans male. The rest of the participants identified with and used the following specific terms to describe their gender identity: non-binary, queer, genderless, agender, gender-non-conforming, genderqueer, and gender fluid. Two respondents labeled their non-binary identity differently from the rest: one white student self-reported their identity as “genderweird,” and the respondent who self-identified as Black described their gender identity as “genderwhatever.”



There were no specific questions about sexual orientation, but some students discussed this identity along with describing their gender identity. These respondents used a range of labels to describe their sexuality including queer, pansexual, pan-romantic and demi-sexual. Pronoun usage was also diverse. All students identified with the gender-neutral pronouns they/them, but some would accept she/hers and him/his. Others also described their pronouns as ze/hir.

### Staff and Faculty Training

All eleven participants in the interviews agreed there should be an implementation of staff and faculty training at HSU. Several reported they were not supported by their faculty, and often they were called by their birth name or misgendered. Some faculty and staff were receptive to students' gender identity, such as asking/using chosen pronouns and chosen names, but others showed less concern. Celeste, 25, a White non-binary, agender student explained a negative experience they had with a faculty advisor:



*This one professor who is actually my advisor, he's like had the hardest time calling me by what I go by and like, okay, if you had someone named Matthew and they told you they go by Matt or Christopher and Chris or something, it wouldn't take you long to catch on, so why is it taking you so long to just do this for me? And I told him that my gender identity is one of the important reasons why I do this... he was like 'oh its because the computer system says your name is this.' I'm like yeah, but it does for Christopher's and Matthew's too so... He just had so many excuses. What wasn't he understanding?*

Casey, a 33-year-old white, self-identified non-binary trans male alum talked about positive encounters they have had with faculty about their pronouns and chosen name. This experience varied, as some students would reach out to faculty in order to establish their correct pronoun, and/or if they have had a name change. This also depended on the degree to which the respondent was “out” about their gender identity, as some students were not out, and did not feel comfortable expressing it to their professors or supervisors. Casey explained:

*There were several teachers who were on board with it but they had problems sticking to pronouns. I had some really embarrassing, scary experiences where...they weren't doing it, it's just that they would forget and I was worried about it. Before class would start, I would contact teachers and say 'hey this is my situation, can you please use the right pronoun and name?' And of course there were some slip ups, and it was really hard to deal with that, since you are basically outing yourself.*

Overall, students would like to see improvements in the way faculty and staff engage with non-binary identities. Being recognized by professors can lead to confidence in student's own knowledge about themselves which relates to many positive outcomes at school, and in their personal lives (Pelham 1991). Celeste and Casey's experiences are not unique; many respondents had similar stories. There were also some positive stories where professors would make the effort to be respectful of the student's non-binary identity. These stories demonstrate how impactful it can be to have open conversations with professors who understand or acknowledge, but how sometimes it can leave students feeling marginalized when they do not know how to handle the situation; they may stay quiet. When they do, they report feeling invisible and invalidated.

Some participants who lived on campus described having negative experiences related to housing. Rawr, 21, a White self-identified non-binary, genderweird student explained:

*In the dorms everybody knew I was non-binary and some people would intentionally [misgender] or approach me in an aggressive way to try to get me to explain myself, or to go back on my identity; it was so uncomfortable. I didn't like living there.*

Rawr explained the other students and staff knew about their non-binary identity, which put them in a vulnerable position. In Rawr's case, the harrassment did not escalate to physical harm, but they were approached in a way they felt was scary and caused distress. Rawr did not mention assistance from other students or staff while they were being harassed in the dorms.

## Gender Neutral Bathrooms

All participants agreed that there should be more gender neutral bathrooms around the HSU campus. Chuck, 22, a self-identified Black, genderwhatever, genderqueer student explained:

*I just wish all bathrooms were gender neutral. I just wish everything was gender neutral like just gender loose... I think you know that we as an entire campus should invest more in gender neutral bathrooms and we should look at like gender structures our entire university. And try to make the whole school a gender neutral place.*

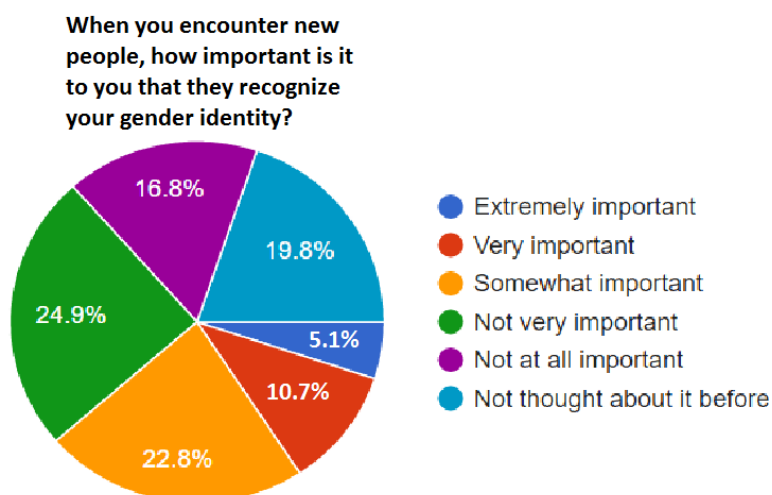
Not only do students like Chuck think bathrooms should be gender neutral, but also other spaces around campus. Since TGNC students are often reminded they do not belong, they may often be reminded by the ways gender, as a system, privileges gender normative people.

Bathrooms are not the only places where TGNC students feel excluded, but also in other spaces throughout campus. As Nadir, 24, a self-identified Asian American, Pilipinx, gender non-conforming, genderqueer student explained:

*We just need to use the goddamn bathroom! So when we have restrooms where other people read us a certain way or expect something else, it can affect our integrity, so there's a microaggression.*

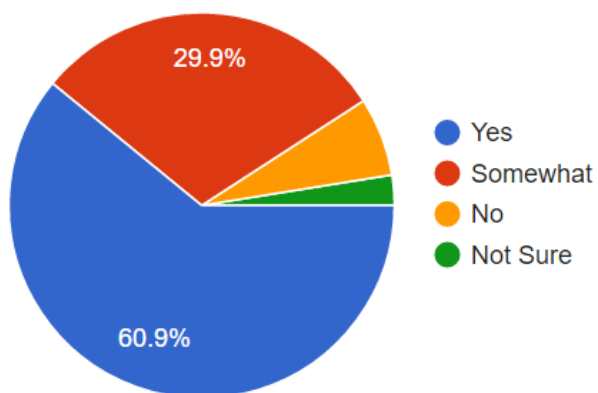
## Importance of Acknowledgement

Gender normative people have their gender identity acknowledged regularly; this is due to society being largely gender and heteronormative. They do not have to navigate their gender identity in careful ways, or have uncomfortable conversations that “out” their gender identity. For people who are non-binary, navigating their gender identity becomes critical if they want to be recognized and affirmed. The way gender non-conforming individuals are perceived guides their interactions with students, staff and faculty, and there are power differentials between students and staff/faculty. When asked how important is it to be recognized as their presented gender identity, nearly two in five students (39%) in the survey reported it is important to them to have their gender identity acknowledged. For individuals who identify as non-binary, this may especially be important. Issues of safety are crucial when navigating campus and life outside of campus day-to-day.



## HSU Student Awareness of Gender Non-Conformity

**Are you familiar with the concept of gender non-conformity?**



According to the survey results, three out of every five participants (61%) were familiar with the concept of gender non-conformity. Just under one-third (30%) were only somewhat familiar, and just shy of 10% were not familiar or not sure. Two-thirds of respondents (66%) reported they know someone who is gender non-conforming.

When asked to share thoughts about gender non-conformity at HSU, the responses fluctuated. For example:

*Personally I don't care who you are or what you identify as since it has zero impact on my life or education.*

*I don't get why someone doesn't just chose male or female.*

*Gender non-conformity is very new to me and I would like to learn more about it.*

*Humboldt is one of the most progressive places that I have been in. I grew up in a small hick town which you can imagine, tends not be extremely open minded. It is nice being somewhere that thinks similar to me and that I learn more from all the time.*

Based on the survey responses, it seems there is variation when it comes to HSU students' knowledge, perceptions and attitudes regarding gender and gender non-conforming folks. Though there were negative comments, responses were mostly positive, as students reported an inclination to learn more about gender diversity and gender non-conforming people.

## HSU Student Comfort with Gender Non-Conformity

When asked about comfort in regards to working with someone who is gender non-conforming, and having a professor, supervisor or family member who is gender non-conforming, participants largely agreed they felt comfortable with those scenarios. Nearly 85% reported they would feel comfortable working with someone who is gender non-conforming, and close to the same number said they would be comfortable taking a class from a gender non-conforming instructor. In both cases, only 2 participants (1%) felt strongly they would not be comfortable working with, or taking a class from, someone who is gender non-conforming. This may mean that HSU is well-positioned to be an affirming and inclusive campus for gender non-conforming students. We may have a unique opportunity to be a leader among the CSU campuses or U.S. universities in general.

## Recommendations

Progressive institutions like HSU could implement better policies and procedures to tackle issues of marginalization and victimization among their gender non-conforming students. The experiences explained by the participants in this study reflect literature on the well-being of transgender and gender diverse individuals, in classroom curricula, extracurricular activities, healthcare, housing and bathroom facilities. Seelman (2016) has offered recommendations on how to address marginalization and victimization of trans and gender non-conforming populations on college campuses. Her suggestions include:

- Education, including campus programming and support for non-binary students.
- Improving systems to change one's name and gender.
- Encouraging inclusivity and recruitment of diverse groups of faculty, staff and administrators.
- Making physical changes to facilities such as bathrooms and locker rooms.
- Holding people accountable for providing and maintaining a safe and inclusive campus at every level.

In the present study, participants who lived on campus reported being harassed, and this was never addressed. Housing should be held accountable for the safety and inclusion of TGNC students, and should incorporate better policies and procedures to report and handle harassment issues. Concurrently, HSU can incorporate educational programming for incoming freshmen and people moving into the dorms. Institutions of higher learning, including HSU, can do better when it comes to supporting TGNC students in all aspects of campus life.

## Recommendations from TGNC HSU Students

Based on the survey and interviews, I have provided some recommendations based on what several students responded in regards to what needs to be addressed here at HSU. Much of what students stated reflects what has been reported in literature.

- Ample access to gender neutral bathrooms and other facilities (e.g. locker rooms).
- Rethinking norms, forms and policies at every opportunity: is this gender segregated? Does it need to be? Is this making gendered assumptions? Are we assuming a binary?
- Better support systems for non-binary students, to include support groups, social clubs, counselors, facilities, and so forth.
- Create and maintain safe and inclusive spaces throughout the HSU campus.
- Educational programming/training for campus and broader Humboldt community
- Work with Cultural Centers for Academic Excellence to be more inclusive of TGNC students, and with Eric Rofes Center and the future Queer Center to be anti-racist.
- Programming, training, policies and norms that incorporate intersectional identities.
- Support curriculum development that includes non-binary topics and TGNC scholars.

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